

How to save a life

Emergency response to a drug overdose in prison, and harm reduction advice

An overdose occurs when there is too much of a drug (or drugs) in the body at one time.

Overdoses are medical emergencies that can be life threatening.



Overdose signs

Overdose signs can vary but might include:



being unresponsive
(will not wake when shaken)



snoring or noisy breathing



blue or pale lips and skin



seizures or fits.

Drugs have different effects and can result in different signs of overdose.

| Downers | Uppers |
|---|--|
| Downer overdose signs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• slowed breathing and heart rate• pinpoint pupils• confusion• cold, clammy skin | Upper overdose signs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• rapid breathing and heart rate• chest pain• hallucinating• overheating• rigid muscles• anxiety or panic |
| Example downers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• benzodiazepines (benzos, diazepam)• opioids (heroin, methadone)• gabapentin and pregabalin• alcohol | Example uppers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• cocaine (coke, crack)• mephedrone (mcat)• amphetamine (speed)• MDMA (ecstasy) |

If someone overdoses

1. Stay calm and shout for help.
2. Alert a member of staff as quickly as possible.
3. Tell them what's happened, and be open about the substances taken so the right care can be given.

If they do not respond to a shout or a shake, check their breathing. Alert a member of staff.

If they're breathing

- put them in the recovery position (on their side)
- give naloxone
- monitor breathing
- after 2-3 minutes give naloxone again.

If they're not breathing

- put them on their back
- give 30 chest compressions followed by two rescue breaths
- give naloxone
- repeat cycles of chest compressions, rescue breaths and naloxone.



Continue cycle until person responds or a member of staff arrives.

After alerting a staff member, there are things you can do to help the person while you wait for help to arrive.

If someone is distressed

- speak to them calmly
- take them somewhere quiet.



If someone is overheating

- take them somewhere cool
- loosen tight clothing
- cool them down with a wet towel.



If someone is having seizures

- do not hold them down or move them, unless they are in danger
- remove objects that could cause harm.



Reducing the harm

The unregulated drug supply is increasingly toxic and unpredictable. Getting support and treatment reduces the risk of experiencing harm or dying from an overdose. Your NHS addictions team can provide information, support and treatment.

- Avoid mixing drugs, including alcohol and medicines.
- Dose low. Take the smallest amount you can.
- Go slow. Leave a long gap in between doses.
- Use drugs in the company of other people, and take turns to dose.
- Avoid injecting. If you do inject, use new equipment.

How to use naloxone

If someone is not responding, naloxone should be given, even if it's unclear what drugs were taken.



- Naloxone is a life-saving medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose temporarily. It comes as an injection or a nose spray.
- Give doses one at a time, waiting 2–3 minutes between each dose.

Naloxone works on opioid drugs but it will not cause the person any harm if opioids have not been used.

To get naloxone, contact the NHS addictions team.



Translations



Easy read



BSL



Audio



Large print



Braille

Translations and other formats are available on request at:



p^hs.otherformats@p^hs.scot



0131 314 5300

Information correct at time of publication.

Please visit: **www.publichealthscotland.scot/RADAR**
for the most up-to-date information.

For further information email: **p^hs.drugsradar@p^hs.scot**

This resource was adapted from the ‘How to save a life’ community resource created by Public Health Scotland in collaboration with Simon Community Scotland.

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